

VASCO M. TANNER — A DEDICATED PUBLIC SERVANT

J. Hamilton Calder¹

My first acquaintance with Vasco M. Tanner was in September of 1936. He was the favorite professor of my cousin, Elma Robinson Allen. Elma insisted that I bring him to her wedding reception, and as a result we had the pleasant opportunity of each other's company to and from Salt Lake City.

On that delightful evening I was impressed with his interest in people and his vast knowledge of government, science, religion, and education. We touched on many subjects. The subject of highways provoked a discussion on Henry Blood, then governor of Utah. There was concern lest the governor's business and engineering background might cause him to neglect pressing social needs of the people of the state. At the Point of the Mountain geology commanded our attention for a few fascinating moments as the professor told of the receding of old Lake Bonneville and the formation of Great Salt Lake and Utah Lake which are connected by the Jordan River.

The wedding reception not only brought teacher and student together for an exchange of felicity, but it also afforded the pleasant opportunity of meeting some of Salt Lake's top society. I must say, Dr. Tanner was as much at home among the Republicans as I have seen him elsewhere among his beloved Democrats.

Our experience at the wedding occurred nine months after Mark Anderson had taken office as mayor of Provo. He was elected on a municipal power platform. The campaign, culminating in his election, and the events that followed attracted attention throughout the Intermountain area.

Mayor Anderson wanted more revenue for Provo City's empty coffers. Municipal power was the source. His opponents thought differently. A venture of this magnitude would bankrupt the city, and this prediction was hammered home by such able speakers as Dr. Adam S. Bennion and G. Ott Romney, both orators in their own right.

Lawsuit followed lawsuit but in the end Mark Anderson was the winner. He had promised the citizens of Provo a revenue-producing power plant operated by a nonpartisan citizen board of three members. The business community had opposed the move almost to a man. Where could three qualified businessmen be found to form the board?

In October of 1939 I received a call from the mayor saying he would like to see me as soon as possible. I met him a few minutes later. "Hamilton," he said, "I have just selected Dr. Vasco M. Tanner as a member of the new Electric Utility Board of Provo City and I want you to be a member of the same board. I have another businessman in mind as the third member. I selected you because of

¹197 Oak Lane, Provo, Utah

your age and business background; and I selected the professor because of his influence and dedication. It's a big job. You have the confidence and support of the city commission."

I remember that parting handshake and the deep feeling of inadequacy that possessed me at the time. I had no misgivings about the fiscal and operating responsibilities of the position, but I knew there would be political overtones, and it was here I felt insecure.

During December I spent two weeks in Kansas and Nebraska studying the operation of municipal power systems in those areas. Dr. Tanner made a similar trip at a later date. One of the most frequent statements I heard in talking to private citizens in many of the cities and towns we visited was, "You can make a success of municipal power if you keep it out of politics." I came back from the trip convinced of the wisdom of this admonition.

At my first opportunity I talked to Dr. Tanner about our experiences in the Middle West. I was relieved to find we were in complete agreement in the major areas of personnel and fiscal policy as well as operating autonomy.

While I don't recall we ever had a formal understanding of our respective areas of responsibility other than those designated by law, it was soon apparent Dr. Tanner was the one member of the board best qualified to handle public relations. He assumed this responsibility from the very beginning and he performed in this area with courage, with dignity, and with perseverance.

During more than thirty years of operation, Provo City Power has never put a man on the payroll for political reasons, and there has never been a case of nepotism. Dr. Tanner is largely responsible for this accomplishment.

Power was first generated and distributed to the citizens of Provo on April 1, 1940. During the hectic days from December to April the board met several afternoons each week, occasionally until midnight. Tempers were frequently strained, but of all the people under pressure it seemed Dr. Tanner kept his composure better than anyone. He was always cool and collected.

In his report to the board early in December of 1940 the superintendent predicted a net income of \$100,000 for the first partial year of operation. He attributed this to the outstanding performance of the employees and recommended the board show its appreciation by giving each employee a turkey for Christmas. When the board hesitated to approve the expenditure, he informed us this was a standard practice in many municipal power cities. With this assurance turkeys were duly ordered for each employee and for the three board members.

On the evening of January 7, 1941, I received a curt telephone call from the mayor directing me to come forthwith to the city hall. My wife had just returned from the hospital with our firstborn. I left home reluctantly.

The mayor spotted me as I entered the city hall. The room was crowded with reporters and irate citizens. He motioned me to the front, and I responded obediently. He was white with rage. As I

stepped on the platform he shouted, "Calder (he usually called me Hamilton)! Tell these people why you gave the employees of the power department turkeys for Christmas." "Because they made \$100,000 for the city and this was our token of appreciation," I answered. "Nonsense," he retaliated, "I thought you had better sense. You have brought disrepute not only to yourself, but to the entire city of Provo. There'll be no money paid out of public funds for this purpose. Goodnight."

As I found my way through the crowded aisle I could feel my emotions swelling within me. I was humiliated beyond description. Tears hampered my descent down the stairway into the darkness beyond. I opened the door expecting relief, but the cold January air shocked me from head to foot. Just then I heard footsteps and the next moment the strong arm of Judge Maurice Harding was around me. Never have I heard more comforting words as he spoke to me in the loneliness of that January night.

The Salt Lake and Provo papers headlined the incident the next day. Enemies of the mayor called me, urging retaliation. Things remained status quo until the next evening when the three members of the board met unofficially. A defiant attitude prevailed. What right has the mayor to embarrass us in this fashion?

It was Dr. Tanner who restored our composure. On his urging we called on the mayor at his home. He welcomed us and was visibly affected by our visit. The next day we reimbursed the city in full for the turkey voucher, each paying one third of the bill out of his own pocket.

Dr. Bennion and Ott Romney misjudged the capabilities of such men as Vasco M. Tanner when they predicted financial ruin for Mark Anderson's dream of a revenue-producing power department. In the years since 1940, Provo City has received \$3,000,000 from this department for operation of the city government. Net income this year will approximate \$1,000,000.

What is there, I ask myself, that distinguishes a man as an outstanding public servant? The answer is ability, honesty, and dedication. Dr. Tanner has all of these attributes.